

THE FATHER'S HAND¹

By G. HUMPHREY

From *The Bookman*

THE Dean and I were sitting after dinner discussing the shortage of students at Oxford since the war began.

"You have no idea," he was saying, "how strange it is to lecture to a class of four or five when one has been accustomed to forty or fifty. This morning, for instance . . ."

"Well, Dean," I put in, "after the war there will be no lectures on Latin poetry. The times are changing."

The old man threw back his head, and his silvery beard waved in the candle-light.

"Listen," he began, "you remember the passage where a father was trying to carve a picture of his son's death?"

"*Bis patriae manus cecidere*," I quoted. "Twice the hands of the father fell. Icarus, was it not, for whom his father had made wings, and who flew too near the sun and fell down to earth?"

He nodded. "*Bis patriae manus cecidere*—twice the father's hands fell to his sides. In our village in the first few months of the war, there came an old man, a refugee from Alsace-Lorraine. By profession, he was a monument carver, and out of the exercise of his craft he had acquired a considerable familiarity with what one might call Phœnix-Latin, the kind that is only called into being when 'Our Esteemed Fellow-Townsmen' dies. He had all the pedant's love for the language. Often he

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would exchange tags with me when I met him in the street.

“‘*Quomodo es?* How are you,’ he would laugh in the tiny general store, to the mystification of the little spectacled proprietress.

“‘*Bene, domine,*’ was my grave answer,—‘Very well, sir.’

“Soon he became very popular in the village, though he was regarded as something of a crank. It appeared that he was of the old days when Alsace-Lorraine belonged to the French. Of his private affairs we could learn nothing, except that he had married young and that his wife had died at the birth of a son. When he was questioned about his early life, he would affect not to understand—‘*Je ne comprend pas, m’sieu*’—this and a shrug of the shoulders was all that we could get out of him.

“Well, the old fellow prided himself on his excellent eyesight, and in the fairly frequent air raids, he refused to go into shelter, preferring instead to remain lying down on the hill outside the village, where he would watch the hostile aeroplane pursued by our guns until it became a speck in the distance toward London. Then he would trudge back again.

“‘The pigs are gone,’ he would reassure us in our cellars, shaking his fist at the sky. ‘Ah the *cochons! Sus Germanicus!*’ and we would crawl out again into God’s air, pleased to see him and knowing that there was no longer any danger even if the ‘all clear’ signal had not yet sounded. For he was always right. He knew from bitter experience.

“One day I saw him in conference with the little knot of sailors that presided over our anti-aircraft defences. He was pointing to the sky rather excitedly and telling them in his broken English something about aeroplanes and ‘it is necessaire that they pass so,’ at the same time indicating a track of sky.

“‘What is it?’ I asked the petty officer.

“‘He’s got an idea for bringing down the Germans,’ explained the man, twitching his thumb rather contemptuously toward my old friend. ‘He says they always

pass over that point above the headland before they turn to London. I never noticed it myself, but there may be something in it. I'll tell the captain.'

"*'En hostes,'* cried the old man in Latin to me, pointing to the place. 'Behold the enemy. It is quite necessaire that he pass by here what you call the landmark, is it not? The German precision, *toujours* the same.'

"I laughed and took him by the arm, down to the village, marvelling at the intense hatred with which he spat out the words. 'The German pigs,' he muttered as we went along. 'They have my country.'

"Soon after there came another raid. We heard the gunfire, without paying much attention to it, so customary had it become. When the safety siren was heard, we all went back to our occupations as usual. I wondered why the old fellow had not appeared, and began to grow anxious, thinking he might have been killed. I was just setting out to look for him when I caught sight of him running toward me over a ploughed field, stopping every other moment to pick up his battered black hat, and looking, even at a quarter of a mile, as if he was full of news of some kind. When he came within a hundred yards or so, still running, he shouted something at me, raising his hands to the sky and then pointing to the earth.

"*'Fuit Ilium,'* I heard. 'Troy is fallen. The German is destroyed. They have him shot, so,' and he brought his arm from above his head to the ground in a magnificently dramatic sweep.

"*'What is it?'* I asked as I reached him.

"Perspiring and mopping his face with the tricolor handkerchief that some would-be wag had given him, he told his tale. The gunners had taken his advice, and fired at the spot he told them, and a German aeroplane had actually been brought down.

"That week the village was jubilant, and my old friend found himself suddenly a hero. The local papers brought out a long account of the affair, with a leader about the 'victim of German autocracy, whom we are proud to shelter in our midst. With the courage that we know so well in our brave allies, he stayed out unprotected and discerned the weak spot in the foe's armor.

We are proud of our guest.' It was, indeed, a proud time for our refugee.

"The naval authorities took over charge of the wrecked aeroplane, and the remains of the fallen aviator were gathered together to be buried the following week in the village cemetery. We were a simple, kind-hearted community, far away in the country, and many of the villagers had themselves sons fighting at the front. So we decided that the village should erect a simple tombstone over the fallen enemy—the resolution being made, I suspect, chiefly as the result of a sermon of the worthy pastor, who pointed out that the dead man was more sinned against than sinning, that he was the victim of the German system, and that we ought not to think bitterly of a fallen foe who died at what he conceived to be his duty.

"The next question was as to the inscription. The old Frenchman brought out a book, which he explained was the '*Vade mecum* for cutters of tombs.' From it he produced a marvellous quotation, which he said came from Seneca. He was listened to now with respect, but I could see that the idea was not popular. No one liked to oppose him, until I finally remarked that something simple would perhaps be better, and suggested, 'Here lies a fallen German,' with the date. The old refugee was obviously very reluctant to give up his wonderful epitaph, but my reading was clearly the favorite, and it was adopted in the end. The obvious man to do the carving was the old stonecutter who had brought down the aeroplane. He was given the commission.

"The burial took place, and the village went back to its normal routine, the old man being supposed to be working on the inscription.

"It was about the time of the discussion of the epitaph that the relics from the recent raid were exposed for view in the little museum at the school. There was no address found on the body, and almost the only personal effect that had survived the terrible fall was a photograph of a woman, young and fair-haired, with the inscription, 'Meine Mutter,' which I translated to the admiring villagers as meaning, 'My Mother.' Nothing else. I went to tell the old Frenchman and ask him

if he had seen the curiosities. I found him sitting in the garden of the cottage where he lived, in the little shed he called his workshop, where the tombstone had been brought. To my surprise, he was lying on the ground, and beside his open hand lay a chisel.

“‘What is it?’ I asked him.

“He started up when he saw me. ‘I was tired,’ he answered confusedly. ‘*Fatigatus opere*, weary with labor. *N’est-ce-pas?*’ and his poor old face relapsed into a sad attempt at a smile.

“‘But you have not begun to labor,’ I answered, trying to joke away an impending feeling of tragedy that I but dimly understood. ‘Why do you not do the work?’

“‘Ah, I cannot. My hands are old, and I can no more.’

“Then I saw that his hands were shaking, and I grew alarmed. I could see that the strain of the last few days was telling on him. He seemed years older. So I gently helped him up and took him indoors, where the good woman of the house put him to bed. I asked her how long he had been sick, and she told me that he had gone out that afternoon, looking well, and intending to buy a chisel and visit the little museum. She had not seen him again till I brought him in from the garden.

“From that time the poor old man seemed to grow feebler and feebler, and we began to think that his last joke had been cracked and all his troubles ended. He seemed to lose all wish to live, lying on his bed without a word, and only taking food when it was almost forced down his throat. I frequently visited him and tried to console him. For the one thing that now troubled him was that he would not be able to execute his commission before he died. ‘Never have I promised and not perform,’ he would say. ‘Oh, for one day of my *pristini roboris* — my youthful strength.’

“I comforted him and told him, against my belief, that he would be out cutting the inscription next spring. But he shook his head sorrowfully, and at each visit he seemed to grow weaker and weaker. The climax came quite suddenly. Summer had turned to fall, and I was taking my usual walk by the light of the harvest moon, passing through the old churchyard, where the German

had been buried and the cross had now been put, uncarved. For we boasted no other stonecutter in the village. I went up to look at it, and by the moonlight I caught sight of the figure of a man. Bending down, I saw my old friend, dead, by the work he had promised. It was not till the next day that they found his chisel by the tombstone, and about a dozen letters which he had chiselled. The villagers thought that the old man had gone out of his mind, for the letters on the stone were not the beginning of the epitaph we had agreed on. They think so yet. For I never told them, and I am the only man who can read what is written on the stone."

Here the Dean was silent a moment or so.

"Well, what had he carved?" I asked.

"*Bis patriae m . . .* Twice the hand of the father failed. The dead man was his son."